

Pliny's Vesuvius: off the beaten track on the Bay of Naples

Roy Gibson

Even the most experienced tourists would benefit from a guide. Here Roy Gibson explains why one could do worse than travel with a copy of Pliny's *Letters*.

Pompeii and Herculaneum are not the only jewels on the Bay of Naples. There are many sites of archaeological interest in the area, including Misenum, ancient Stabiae, and Oplontis. It was from Misenum that the Younger Pliny observed the eruption of A.D. 79, the same eruption that buried Pompeii and Herculaneum and killed his uncle, also called Pliny, at Stabiae. Oplontis is a great place to see the effects the nephew later writes about.

If you have ever seen a documentary about the eruption of Vesuvius, or read Robert Harris's gripping historical novel *Pompeii*, then you will have heard of Pliny senior and junior. Pliny the Elder was a naval commander and author whose *Natural History*, which he dedicated to the emperor Vespasian, is one of the most famous encyclopedias of all time. His nephew was also keen to flatter the emperor, penning an oration in praise of Trajan. But he is best known for his obsessive writing of letters, two of which (numbers 6.16 and 6.20 in modern editions) describe the eruption. It might seem strange at first that neither of these mentions Pompeii and Herculaneum. But they are a response to a request from the historian Tacitus (see Myles Lavan's piece later in this issue) for specific information about the death of the Elder Pliny at Stabiae, some 7 kms south of Pompeii, and for the effects of the eruption as experienced by the Younger Pliny at Misenum, about 36 kms north. Tacitus was not unusual amongst ancient historians for being more interested in the fate of his fellow members of the elite over and above the plight of the mass of citizens. For all that visitors to Pompeii have relied on Pliny's *Letters* to give them a sense of what the eruption looked and felt like, Pliny fails to mention either the town or its inhabitants.

In Pliny's footsteps

Visiting the locations which are mentioned in Pliny's *Letters* will afford us some of the best views of the bay of Naples. And the buzz it generates is not just about sightseeing. As one classicist put it,

'Topos [place] and topography [detailed description of place] persist in reacting with one another... The scene will offer critical reflections of the text – not truth, despite the hard reality of streets and buildings, but another interpretation'.

It is not just that Pliny helps us look or work out what to look at. It is possible that looking enhances our understanding of his *Letters* – so bring a text with you!

First, for orientation, a short account of the eruption of Vesuvius, from Pliny's perspective. In the year of the eruption, Pliny the Elder was commander of Rome's western imperial fleet at Misenum on the northern rim of the bay of Naples. On spotting the first signs of the explosion in the early afternoon of 24 August, Pliny the Elder set about organizing a naval scientific-cum-rescue mission and appears at first to have tried to land in the vicinity of Oplontis (not far from Pompeii). However, some form of volcanic debris or uplift in the sea floor frustrated this attempt, forcing him to sail further south towards the town of Stabiae, where there may have been an outpost for the imperial fleet. It was there that Pliny the Elder died in the early hours of the next morning, apparently as a result of the clouds of gas caused by the eruption. Throughout these events, the Younger Pliny, who was 17 at the time, had stayed behind at Misenum (to finish his homework on Livy, or so he tells us). It was while waiting there for the return of his uncle – almost certainly dead already – that he and his mother were caught up in

the effects of the eruption. Attempting to flee Misenum, they were enveloped by a volcanic cloud, but lived to tell the tale – unlike their relation. What kinds of connections are there between landscape and letters? How do we benefit from seeing them?

Ancient Stabiae

Many visitors to the Bay of Naples choose to stay in Sorrento, on the southern rim of the bay, so the brief guide which follows assumes a base there. That said, it can easily be re-oriented for visitors staying (e.g.) in Naples itself. Detailed directions and locations can be found in the guidebook by Lawrence Keppie recommended at the end of this piece.

A short trip on the Circumvesuviana railway will bring you to Castellammare di Stabia, the site of ancient Stabiae. The settlement can be identified with some precision, since the modern town sits on what is effectively the ancient beach, while ancient Stabiae itself is located on a low cliff just above the town. Stabiae was in reality a collection of luxury villas strung out across this cliff so as to enjoy the views across the bay. The entrance to two of them, Villa Arianna and Villa San Marco, is off the Via Passeggiata Archeologica. (There are plans to transform the ancient villas into an Archaeological Park. But, at present, you may find yourself virtually alone here.) This adds something to the realization that it was in one of these villas that the Elder Pliny took shelter from the incessant hail of pumice stones pumped out by Vesuvius. Later, on the ancient beach at the foot of the cliff, the Elder died. Only ten km north, the volcano is still ominously visible.

Oplontis

A further short trip on the Circumvesuviana railway will bring you to the Torre Annunziata ('Oplonti Villa di Poppaea') station, and – after a brief walk

down the hill along Via Sepolcri – to the scandalously under-visited villa at ancient Oplontis. The Elder Pliny appears to have tried to land near here before making for Stabiae – but that is not the main reason to visit this site. Quite apart from the high quality of its well-preserved ancient wall paintings (the villa appears to have belonged originally to Nero's wife, Poppaea), the site is surrounded on all sides by some of the best exposures of the various layers of the A.D. 79 eruption. At Pompeii, visitors have to work hard to find similar exposures, since the volcanic material of which they are composed was necessarily removed during excavations. But at Oplontis, the layers are plainly visible – more than 15 of them in total, each testimony to a wave of devastation emanating from Vesuvius. These include sections of pumice stones, debris left by flows of volcano material along the ground, and – smallest and deadliest of all – the thin dark lines which mark 'pyroclastic surges'. These are the traces left by swift and violent waves of superheated volcanic gas and ash. Surges of this kind asphyxiated the inhabitants of Herculaneum and Pompeii and the Elder Pliny.

Misenum

The final destination, Misenum, is a little harder to reach; but the views which it affords make the journey worth it. The last stop of the Circumvesuviana line is the Stazione Centrale (Garibaldi) in Naples: from here take a SEPSA bus in the direction of Torregaveta/Monte di Procida, getting off at the Miliscola stop in Bacoli. From here the distinctive plateau of Capo di Miseno – rising to 100 m. above sea level – will be plainly visible. The cape marks the legendary burial site of Aeneas' steersman, Misenus, but in Pliny's day it also sheltered at its landward base the residence of the commander of the western imperial fleet. All trace of this has now gone, but the admiral's house must have been near the ancient Sacellum of the Augustales on Via Faro. It was here that Pliny's mother first caught sight of the volcanic cloud. The Elder Pliny then climbed to the top of the cape to get a better view (an imperial villa topped the cape in ancient times).

To emulate Pliny's ascent, modern visitors are best advised to make their way (with great caution: watch out for cars) along the road tunnel which cuts underneath the cape to emerge on the seaward side near the lighthouse. A path which leaves the car park here will take you up to the top of the cape, and from here you will get a view, on a clear day, of the entire bay of Naples (and the islands of Ischia and Capri, itself interesting for its Villa Jovis which belonged to the emperor Tiberius).

If you then look inland, back in the direction of the bus stop, you will find yourself viewing a local beach (Spiaggia di Miliscola) and the lagoon of the Inner Harbour ('Mare Morto') from where the Elder Pliny set out on his fatal rescue mission with a flotilla of ships. Up to 10,000 sailors were stationed here in antiquity, although the only traces of their presence are the moles in the harbour and the huge reservoir which provided them with water. This *piscina mirabilis* is a central feature of Robert Harris's *Pompeii*, and can be found on Via Piscina Mirabile in Bacoli.

As for the Younger Pliny's experiences here in Misenum, scholars cannot decide whether he and his mother fled the volcanic cloud west along the Spiaggia di Miliscola towards Monte di Procida, or north through Bacoli towards the high ground above Baiae. Perhaps a renewed close reading of Pliny's letter, and a fresh attempt to match its co-ordinates to the landscape, will help you to decide. But already, as the sun sets over Naples, you should be gaining a richer, more emotive engagement with this territory and his writing.

Reading:

Lawrence Keppie's guidebook, *The Romans on the Bay of Naples: An Archaeological Guide* (The History Press, 2009, c. £16) is highly recommended. The Latin text of Pliny *Letters* 6.16 and 6.20 is most easily accessed in the Loeb edition of B. Radice; P. G. Walsh's Oxford World's Classics translation is also worth a look. The website for Stabiae is: www.stabiae.com; and the website for Oplontis is: www.oplontisproject.org.

For reading before you go: the best account of the A.D. 79 eruption is by H. Sigurdsson and S. Carey, in *The Natural History of Pompeii* (eds. W. F. Jashemski and F. G. Meyer, Cambridge University Press, 2002). Good popular histories of Vesuvius include G. Darley, *Vesuvius: the Most Famous Volcano in the World* (Profile Books, 2011) and A. Scarth, *Vesuvius: A Biography* (Princeton, 2009).

For Pompeii, essential reading are M. Beard, *Pompeii: the Life of a Roman Town* (Profile, 2008) and S. Hales and J. Paul, *Pompeii in the Public Imagination from its Rediscovery to Today* (Oxford, 2011). Andrew Wallace-Hadrill's *Herculaneum: Past and Future* (Frances Lincoln, 2011) makes the case for paying more attention to this often neglected site.

For more on Pliny, see R. Gibson and R. Morello, *Reading the Letters of Pliny the Younger: an Introduction* (Cambridge, 2012).

Roy Gibson teaches Latin at the University of Manchester and – since he

is currently writing a commentary on Pliny, Book 6 – will be interested to hear about your experience of reading Pliny's *Vesuvius letters on the bay of Naples*: roy.gibson@manchester.ac.uk.